

**HEARTLINES**

The Centre for Values Promotion

# What's Your Story?: **CHURCH QUALITATIVE FIELDWORK**

LIV Village - Case Study  
24 September 2019



# Prologue

LIV, a Christian organisation that provides holistic, residential care for orphans and vulnerable children, was founded in 2009. Its core vision is to rescue a child, restore a life, raise a leader and release a star. The children are identified through the Department of Social Development and each child is placed in a family environment with a foster mother to love them, with new brothers and sisters, and where all their physical needs are met. They are based in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN).

The team met with Heartlines and learnt about the WYS programme. WYS fits well with the LIV values of building community. LIV decided to try and share the programme to see whether it could deepen the connections amongst people within the Village and so the journey began.

## Introduction

Heartlines is a Johannesburg-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) that focuses on promoting positive values with a view to transforming behaviour. In 2016, Heartlines initiated its 'What's Your Story?' (WYS) programme that aims to build empathy through the personal sharing of stories.

WYS is promoted in different contexts, including in workplaces, educational settings and in faith-based organisations. In faith-based organisations, WYS seeks to achieve the following goal: promoting the virtue of love (empathy) to create a vibrant, welcoming and connected church community that interacts with the wider community with relational intentionality.

In 2017, Heartlines brought Singizi Consulting Africa on board in order to evaluate WYS. This case study was developed as part of the evaluation and was based on the following interviews (face to face and telephonic) and focus groups:

- The operations manager and head of the organisation
- 4 staff members of the organisation who have been involved in WYS
- 3 athletes who live in the Village and are part of the LIV2Run team

## Changes Resulting from WYS

During this case study we explored whether WYS had contributed to changes: personal, changes in the ways that individuals interact with each other and changes in the Village more widely. We also explored the reasons for any changes. As outlined below, all respondents indicated that WYS had changed the way they interact with each other as well as their perceptions of each other. This is described in more detail below.

### Personal change

Respondents all spoke of the personal changes that they have experienced through WYS. A member in one of the groups (sport) commented that:

*"I have now learned how to open up and talk about myself."*

One staff member explained that she had participated in WYS and that it had led her to reflect on herself and had resulted in new levels of self-realisation. As an example of this personal growth one respondent commented that:

*"Growing up in a Christian family, it was so easy to tell people what is it that they are doing wrong and really be very judgmental, without considering that everyone has a story to tell. I no longer separate myself from other people with labels like 'I am a born-again Christian'. I listen more to people than before, and I have learned the importance of giving people time to tell their stories; be it in anger, frustration or happiness."*

Another respondent commented that the key change she had experienced was to be less judgmental. She observed:

*"WYS helped me to learn not to judge other people. I have learned that whoever or whatever the person is, there is a story behind it. I am more interested to hear the story behind the behaviour, attitude, character or looks. I want to know how they got to be where they are before judging or making conclusions about them. There has to be a story".*

One respondent indicated that she had often shared her story in the past and had also asked others to share their stories. However, WYS had offered her a structure to initiate the storytelling process more effectively and had taught her how to listen more actively than before. She indicated that this allows her to reach out to a range of people in the Village. She commented:

*"My story is also my testimony and I believe that it can help another person. I share what I believe will encourage another person."*



## Connecting with others in the organisation

Respondents (staff in the LIV Village) also spoke of the ways in which WYS has led them to make changes in how they relate to others in the organisation.

One respondent reflected on the experience of sharing stories with people within the community, observing that this process really shifted their preconceived ideas about each other.

*"I heard briefly that he lost his mom at a very young age and as a result he is not an easy person to talk to most of the times. I just wanted to hear his story and tell him my story too. He knew that someone invited him for coffee, but he had no idea it was me. He accepted the invitation. It was tense at first, in the sense that I always knew him as a person who keeps to himself all the time and always presents himself as such. Amazingly, as the conversation carried on, he was relaxed and very talkative. His positive approach to the whole conversation was the total opposite of what I expected of him. He also told me about his assumptions about me. Because I do interpret for those who don't understand English/ Zulu, he thought I was this educated person with a degree, who grew up in a good home with everything that I needed. Maybe at times snobbish, because I can speak English well. He was really surprised to hear that I was raised by a single mom in a shack, and she had to scrape and hustle so hard to feed us and take us to school. He could not believe that I went a township school."*

Another respondent indicated that WYS had helped her to integrate well with the organisation and get to know others and start new friendships.

*"I started working here one year ago. When I first got here, I found it difficult to connect with people. My home is not in the Village, so I drive in and out every day. We all work so hard and think we don't have much time to talk more. So, I decided to take advantage of this opportunity to talk to people and try to get to know them better. I was also hoping that it would even improve my working relationship with my colleagues in my department."*



One respondent observed that WYS had allowed them to be vulnerable and to open up to each other, getting to know each other as people beyond being employees at LIV Village. Another respondent observed that WYS had allowed members of the Village to see similarities amongst themselves commenting that the impact at the end of the workshop on people *"from different races was profound."*

Others confirmed this and indicated that prior to this intervention, there were real tensions between people from different racial groups. WYS had led to shifts as people *"got to understand each other and gained more respect towards one another"*.

Respondents spoke about how individuals have come to care about each other more and they now believe that talking is the best way to solve problems. One commented:

*"We check on each other's wellbeing, when the other is down we check on them and give them space."*

The team leader added that she found out, through WYS, that some of the athletes do not have mothers and said

*"I asked them for their permission to be their mother since then."*

Another respondent indicated that WYS broke barriers with many people in the Village.

*"I believe that there is less judgment. People talk more to each other than before. There is more positivity amongst each other."*

Their experience is summarised by one of the respondents:

*"We shared our stories, we know each other much better than before, especially our backgrounds, history and upbringing. We discovered personal things about each other, our differences and similarities, etc. Learning about where my colleagues grew up, especially the fact that they grew up in the rural areas. I had no idea what it is like to grow in the rural areas, but now I do. This has really improved our working relationship as well".*

Further, LIV2Run athletes team members also spoke to these changes. LIV 2Run is an athletics programme where children participate in running sports, some children live in the Village and some in the neighbouring communities.

They faced challenges within the team related to communication and personal differences. The coach explained that WYS helped him connect with other team members and the team leader.



One of the athletes said he learned a lot from the experience of WYS and watching the movie.


*"We found the movie very inspiring and encouraging. It taught us not to judge and to get to know people. By the time you get to know the other person better, you do things differently, you treat each other differently. We learned that we need to gain each other's trust, to be a better team, through storytelling. Before WYS, I did not have anyone to talk to. I grew up not opening up with anyone. I found this very strange, no one asked me about my sport, how I did on the competitions. Where I come from, I did not have people to talk to. I did not understand why people in the Village want to know about me, this was very awkward, I hesitated. I started seeing people as humans and removed the colour barrier as well."*

These views, shared by staff and groups in the Village, were also shared by the leadership. A leader in the organisation reiterated these changes and observed:

*"We work in an organisation that works with people's wellbeing. At the beginning I thought we were an open community at the Village. I thought we were having these conversations already, but with the introduction of WYS we realised that we need to go beyond 'Sawubona' so that 'Sawubona' means more. It now genuinely means 'I see you, tell me your story, how are you?'."*

### **Changes in the organisation**

People in the Village observed that through WYS, the environment of the organisation has changed. They commented that they have not previously worked in an environment where people care so much about each other. Respondents reported that the teachers are now talking to each other.



*"During lunch breaks they are talking to people of different races that they have not been talking to before. Before, there was a sense that people of similar races sat together, and this changed almost immediately after WYS. I heard teachers coming back to me saying for the first time they got to hear about each other's background and understand who they are."*

For example, the athletic team suggested that since sharing WYS they had become more of a family. They have more trust in each other and are more supportive towards each other. This has, in turn, led them to become a stronger team, learning and motivating each other. One respondent commented:

*"We communicate better, we address problems better, we are more aware that we come together as individuals from different backgrounds and respect each other's space".*

Other comments include:

*"When new people join the team, we get to know them using WYS, we share how we grew up and how to get to where we are, and this helps us interact and understand one another. We have made this a culture".*

*"Before I used to think other people don't face challenges, but through WYS we learn from each other's stories. The way we view each other has changed, I used to judge people based on how they look and was surprised that their stories are different from my initial perceptions of them. After getting to know others, I learned not to judge. WYS has strengthened our relationship as a family. On Wednesdays we have devotion, where we pray and talk and share stories and WYS has helped us as we learned how to start these conversations. I have never done anything like this before, I was afraid of opening up and being judged, but we have had a safe space in the team. I will share my stories with other people going forward. I think this is useful and it helps to talk about your pain. I had so much anger before I came to the Village, I think WYS will help people before they are drawn into depression."*



The coach of the team commented that there was some anxiety meeting the team leader because she was white. The team leader in turn stated that she was offended that other team members treated her differently.

She shared that during WYS, some people did not know that she grew up in the Eastern Cape and that she is fluent in isiXhosa. She observed that people see each other differently through this process and that this has transformed the organisation.

## What Happened to Get There?

### Description of what took place

This section provides a description of when and how respondents were introduced to WYS, how it was taken forward, where and in what ways.

LIV Village has 30 foster mothers, and each has up to six children to care for. LIV offers educational opportunities, healthcare, psychosocial support services, sports, arts and cultural opportunities for the children. There is a church, an Early Childhood Development centre, a school from Grade 1 to 12 and a clinic. The children, as well as the employees, are from different races and cultures in South Africa.

In 2019, the organisation was introduced to Heartlines and WYS through a workshop at one of the local churches. The head of operations from LIV, C, shared his story and formed a real connection with others during the workshop.

He formed a connection with the Heartlines WYS facilitator and trainer in KZN who also runs an organisation focusing on orphans and vulnerable children. C observed:

*"I had never attended a workshop like this before. Those two days allowed us, as a group of people, to be vulnerable, share our stories, our backgrounds and understand how we got to where we are currently. As a result, when participants were asked to make a commitment to take forward this methodology, I raised my hand and said: 'I want to take this back to the Village, because of the nature of our organisation that is diverse with people from all walks of life'."*





## Taking WYS Forward

A week after the church workshop, C invited Heartlines to the Village to facilitate a workshop with managers from different departments at LIV: school department, homes management, marketing, health, support services, training and skills development, sports, social development, therapy, volunteer department. During this workshop Heartlines included several different activities including showing film clips from the 'Beyond the River' movie, and sharing their stories.

After this workshop, the managers each took this process further in their respective areas. For example, the headmaster took WYS to the teachers' meeting, the support services manager took WYS to his team and the overall coordinator shared stories with foster mothers and employees. The sharing of stories was encouraged by the introduction of the 'Buy 1 coffee get 1 free' programme.

This six-week programme, ending in September 2019, involved someone buying a coffee and inviting a person to enjoy the coffee and share their stories. The cashier at the coffee shop marked slips for the 'Buy 1 get 1 free coffee' in order to monitor the way that the scheme was used.

C explained that the coffee campaign was introduced to get everyone that lives and works in the Village to intentionally engage in WYS.

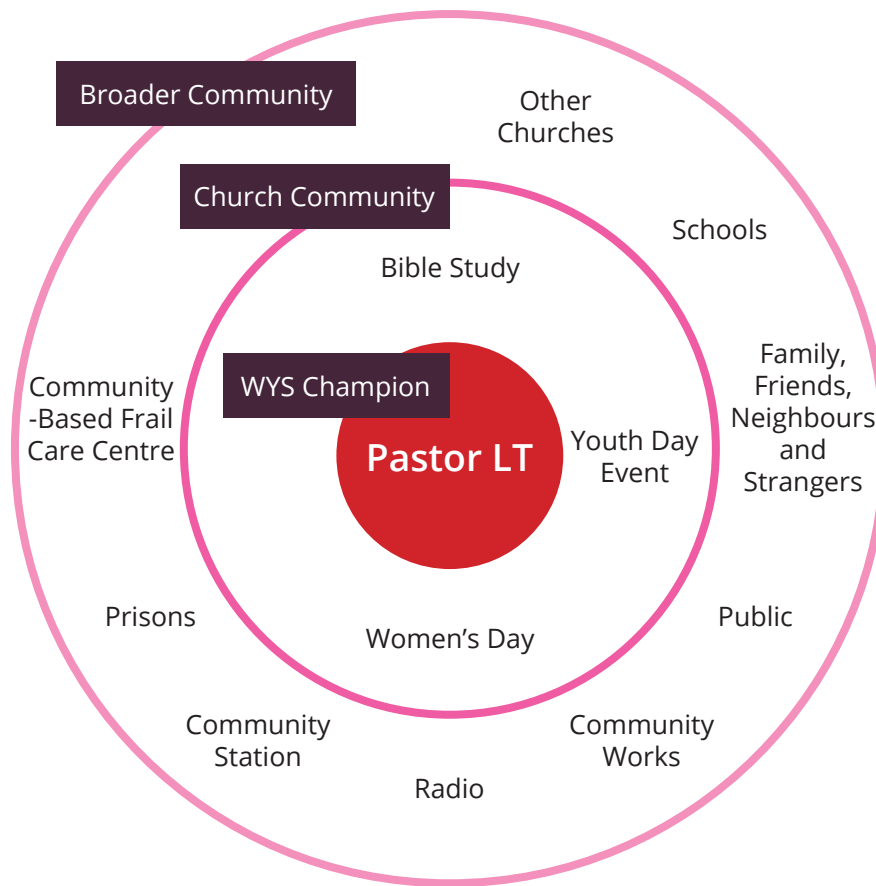
During the interviews, respondents indicated that they intended to share WYS further and stated that the Village will have a movie viewing session of 'Beyond the River' during the first week of October 2019. One respondent commented that she plans to implement WYS with her family as her Johannesburg-based son doesn't talk much and is very reserved.

*"I think now I have a good tool to start those conversations with him, especially about the absence of his father since we have not had this conversation".*

Another respondent observed:

*"We are still thinking of other creative ways to continue WYS and eventually we want the children in the Village to engage in WYS in 2020".*

The spread and ripple effect of WYS is depicted in the following diagram:



## Impeding or Promoting Factors

This section explores factors that may have contributed to WYS success or lack of success.

### Creating safe spaces

The team coach explains that WYS changed how he thinks about other cultures and races, and that he is learning many new things from other Villagers since WYS.

*"We fight as colleagues and we don't blame race. We come to understand each other differently."*

*"I was afraid to be judged, I have two children with different women, and I was embarrassed by this because of my age, but I was not judged during the process. When I became comfortable, I invited the team to come to my home. I was nervous, my family was nervous, because I was bringing a white person as well."*

## A multimedia experience: different ways of seeing and doing

Respondents suggested that a key contributor to change related to the exposure to the 'Beyond the River' movie. The teachers said that this really led to them to see things in new ways. They observed that this was further strengthened by the fact that they were then given the chance to share stories. For the first time, they did not focus on the work but about who they are as individuals and how they come together to do the work they have been called to do. This was a significant shift.

Respondents from Liv 2Run confirmed the power of this multi-media approach. They watched the 'Beyond the River' movie during their athletic team camps and observed that the movie resonated with the dynamics that they have faced in the team; mostly related to mistrust and conflict. They observed that this, combined with WYS, had then allowed them to *"share each other's stories, getting to know each other, visiting each other's families as a result."*

## Being provided with the tools to carry on the work

Respondents stated that learning new skills had been an important factor in the success of WYS. One respondent commented:

*"WYS gave us a better platform, they gave us the tools to have meaningful and impactful relationships, I have observed people talking that I have not seen talking with each other before".*

## Suggestions to strengthen WYS

Respondents made some suggestions about ways that WYS could be adapted. The LIV 2Run team stated that Heartlines needs to be aware that these are hard conversations to have and require a lot of trust to be established prior to engaging in difficult conversations. It is understandable that people are apprehensive about taking part in WYS, particularly in the workplace, where people may fear losing their reputations. WYS could start with devotion before engaging in WYS. For example, it could be easier to start with the meaning of their names during the first week, and then progress to a different activity the following week, rather than having both activities on the same day. This could be a step by step process:

*"It's not fair to make a demand on people to give away their trust, trust should be built over time."*

*"From WYS methodology, especially approaching someone straight on and ask them to have coffee with for the purposes of hearing their story, you may find a lot of resistance. Sometimes people ask themselves why you chose them. I recommend that maybe encourage the people to have normal day to day conversations like: 'How are you? How was your day?' before they ask each other for coffee. In that way you can smoothly escalate into having coffee."*

## Conclusion

This case study illustrates how WYS has been taken forward and illustrates how WYS can impact on the personal level, between groups of people, and across an entire organisation. WYS helped this community to build relationships, creating a working environment where people are connected and genuinely care for each other.

This case study also highlights that WYS is a robust and safe way of doing this. They observe that through giving them a tool to use, to share their stories, they have a sense of agency and the skills to take it forward.

## Epilogue

After running WYS, the leader of the Village reflected on what they had intended and where they are now. He feels pleased that WYS has already helped the Village and is confident that, as more and more people share their stories, this will further help the Village to be united. The power of people getting to know each other, understanding each other, respecting each other and valuing each other are all central to realising their common goal of the LIV Village: that of restoring lives.

## Contact us

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